DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 156 010 HE 010 125

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TITLE Factors Affecting Decisions of Freshman Students Applying to GVSC for Fall, 1976. Summar, Report.
INSTITUTION Grand Valley State Colleges, Allendale, Mich. Office of Institutional Analysis.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cluster Colleges; *College Choice; *College Freshmen; Costs; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Physical Facilities; Questionnaires; Research Projects; *School Surveys; *State Colleges; Statistical Data; *Student Motivation; Student Opinion
IDENTIFIERS *Grand Valley State Colleges MI

ABSTRACT

A survey of freshmen students who applied for admission to Grand Valley State Colleges (GVSC) for fall term 1976 was conducted to explore the factors that affect the choice of GVSC. A survey instrument was used that asked for one response out of several alternatives to nine questions dealing with factors affecting the following four decisions: whether to go to college or not; whether to go away to college; which college to go to; and which of GVSC's four undergraduate colleges to attend. Results show that the majority of college applicants decided to attend college to prepare themselves for a job with more potential earning power or prestige. The students who decided to go away to college generally made the choice to be "on their own" or to participate fully in a campus lifestyle. Students were found to choose GVSC over other colleges because of good campus facilities, program considerations, academic diversity, academic reputation, and cost, in that order. Academic program was reported to play a much larger role in the selection of a college within the GVSC federation than in the selection of GVSC over other colleges or universities. (SPG)

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Factors Affecting Decisions of Freshman Students Applying to GVSC for Fall, 1976 (Summary Report)

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Office of Institutional Research
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November, 1976

Report #66

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Background

Any college or university is naturally interested in admissions processes, since the admissions process provides the input to the system. Grand Valley has not had any good "first hand" data about how and why its students decided to come here. The only data available was from such sources as the Student Assessment section of the American College Testing Program. This data is not terribly useful in that the focus is on factors affecting college choice in general rather than on those factors which affected the particular choice of Grand Valley State Colleges.

In order to explore the factors which affect the choice of Grand Valley by incoming students, several selection factors were chosen.

It was decided to survey only students who had been admitted to one of the four undergraduate colleges for Fall Term 1976. The decision to eliminate transfer students was made in order to keep the survey relatively simple, since the phrasing of several questions would have to be changed if both groups were to be surveyed using the same instrument. The decision to survey students who had applied for Fall 1976 rather than students already on campus was made in order to obtain the students' responses in very close proximity to the time in which the decisions about college had been made.

Theoretical Framework of Survey Instrument

This author (also the author of the survey instrument) felt that a freshman college applicant had to make four primary decisions in order to be admitted to one of GVSC's undergraduate colleges. First, the decision of whether to go to college or engage in some other pursuit had to be made. Then, assuming a decision to go to college was reached, a decision was probably made about whether to "go away" to college or attend some college in the local area of the person's normal residence. Following this, a decision on the specific college had to be made. Finally, once the student had decided on Grand Valley, a choice among the four undergraduate colleges was then necessary.

A survey instrument asking for one response out of several alternatives for nine different questions dealing with factors affecting these four decisions was developed. Because alternative wording was necessary to get at the second decision (whether to go to school locally or go away to school), alternative forms were developed for those students who would be attending GVSC as commuting students and for those who would be non-commuting students.

A small pilot test of the survey instrument was conducted on an orientation group for Summer 1975. As a result of the pilot testing, several changes were made to avoid ambiguous statements.

Methodology of Survey

It was decided to take three different samples of students applying and being admitted for Fall 1976. The first sample consisted of all students who had

applied during the first six weeks of the Admissions Year (the admissions year begins with the first full week in October). Thus, this sample consists of the "early birds"--those who have applied nearly a year in advance of Fall, 1976.

Subsequent samples of six weeks were taken in February-March, 1976, and July-August, 1976. This ultimately gave us results for those who applied early, in the middle of the year, and the late applyers. We can then see if any differences exist based upon when students apply.

We designed the instrument to allow for the identification of the particular GVSC college to which the student applied in order to examine any differences on this variable.

Three different group comparisons were made; commuter versus non-commuter, date of application, and CAS versus non-CAS students. The latter was done in lieu of a by-college comparison because of the relatively small number of responses for WJC, TJC, and CIV (CAS = 176, WJC = 16, TJC = 5, CIV = 2).

The comments listed which indicate differences between groups were tested for statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. Readers interested in more detail concerning the statistical procedure and results are referred to the technical version of this report, available from the Office of Institutional Research.

Results (Total Without Breakdown into Subgroups Comparisons)

The survey instrument was mailed to students who had applied and been admitted to an undergraduate college as FTIAC's (first time in any college students) for Fall, 1976. The number sent and the number returned are shown below:

	Survey Response		
	# Sent	# Returned	% Response
Early Applicants	112	68	61%
Mid-Year Applicants	214	103	48%
Late Applicants	65	28	43%
Total	391	199	51%

This represents a good return rate. Generally, returns in the neighborhood of 30-40% are obtained on mail surveys.

Of the total returns, 61 indicated that they would be commuting students and 138 indicated that they would be non-commuting (would be living on campus or in nearby private housing).

The questions and the responses for each group are summarized below. The number of responses for each question will not always equal the total number of surveys returned. Cases where students indicated more than one response per question (contrary to instructions) were omitted. Questions 1 and 2 on the survey instrument dealt with identifying information and are not included in these tables.

1) Summary of Responses:

Question 3 -

Why did you decide to go to college as opposed to starting directly into the job market (or any other non-college type of activity)? If you were already employed or otherwise involved full-time in non-educational pursuits during the last school year, why did you decide to leave that for college or combine it with college attendance?

Responses -	Total
a) Jobs are too hard to find right now	0%
b) My parents (or my spouse) wanted me to go to college	1%
c) I want to prepare myself for a job with more prestige or earning power	74%
d) I just enjoy learning for the sake of knowing more about myself and the world around me	11%
e) To expand my social and cultural opportunities in life	13%
f) Most of my friends are going to college	1%
g) My employer has a program which encourages/supports workers attending college	0%
h) I need to update my job skills for my present job	0%
Number of Responses	177

Question 4 - (Non-Commuting Students)

Why did you decide to go away to college rather than going to a college within commuting distance of your home?

Responses -	Non-Commuting
a) There are no colleges within commuting distance of my home	2%
b) If I lived at home, I wouldn't feel like I was really "going to college"	5%
c) I just wanted to be able to be on my own, away from home	40%
d) I want the social and cultural opportunities of living on or near campus	31%
e) No local college offers the academic program I want	22%
Number of Responses	120

Question 4 - (Commuting Students)

Why did you decide to go to school locally instead of "going away" to college?

Responses -

	Commuting
a) Local colleges generally have as much to offer as those farther away	31%
b) Cost factors caused me to attend a local college, although I really wanted to attend a non-local college	31%
c) I have family and/or job obligations which will keep me in the local area	19%
d) I prefer to live at home for personal reasons rather than for reasons of cost or local obligation	20%
Number of Responses	59

Question 5 -

Why did you choose GVSC as opposed to another college?

Responses -

	Total
a) Lower tuition or lower total cost	10%
b) Financial aid program	1%
c) Driving distance is less	7%
d) Prefer rural location	9%
e) It's the only one that offers the program I want	17%
f) Good campus facilities and general attractiveness	24%
g) Academic reputation of GVSC	11%
h) Social reputation of GVSC	0%
i) Most of my friends attend GVSC	2%
j) Availability of evening courses	0%
k) Academic diversity in programs and/or methods of instruction	15%
l) Athletic programs	4%
Number of Responses	169

Question 6 -

What was the most important influence on your decision to attend GVSC rather than another college?

Responses -

	Total
a) Friends	12%
b) Parents and/or relatives	12%
c) High school teachers and/or counselors	10%
d) It was strictly a personal decision with no outside influence	37%
e) College admissions office personnel	4%
f) College catalog or brochures	13%
g) Newspaper, radio, or TV advertising	0%
h) Campus Visit	10%
i) College faculty members	2%
Number of Responses	179

Question 7 -

Why did you choose the particular college (CAS, WJC, TJC, CIV) within the GVSC cluster that you did?

Responses -

	Total
a) Its academic program offered what I wanted	79%
b) I like its style or method of instruction	9%
c) Its faculty seems really interested in its students	1%
d) Its size appeals to me	2%
e) I like its sense of community and the feeling of closeness among the students	0%
f) I preferred another one, but I was not able to get admitted	0%
g) Its schedule of courses or instruction best fits my personal schedule	9%
Number of Responses	188

Question 8 -

What was the most important influence on your decision of a particular college within the GVSC cluster?

Responses -

		Total
a)	Friends	6%
b)	Parents and/or relatives	12%
c)	High school teacher and/or counselors	7%
d)	It was strictly a personal decision with no outside influence	45%
e)	College admissions office personnel	6%
f)	College catalog or brochures	20%
g)	Newspaper, radio, or TV advertising	0%
h)	Campus visit	2%
i)	College faculty members	2%
	Number of Responses	181

Question 9 -

If the particular college to which I was admitted was not in existence, I probably would not attend GVSC at all.

Responses -

		Total
a)	This statement reflects my feelings	63%
b)	This statement does not reflect my feelings	37%
	Number of Responses	196

Discussion

The first question faced by a student who eventually enrolls in Grand Valley is the whole matter of attending college as opposed to some other pursuit such as employment. The vast majority decided upon the higher education course of action because of a desire to prepare themselves for a job with more potential earning power or prestige. Twenty-four percent (24%) indicated that they made the choice because they just enjoyed the educational process or to expand their social and cultural opportunities in life. Non-CAS students are more likely to choose to go to college because they "enjoy learning" than are CAS students. The same can be said for non-commuters as compared to commuters. Early applicants seem to be more pragmatic than later applicants in that they are less likely to go to college because they "enjoy learning" or for social or cultural reasons.

The students who decide to "go away to college," and thus will be a non-commuter at Grand Valley, generally made the choice through either an urge to be "on their own" or a desire to participate fully in a campus lifestyle. Those that made the decision to attend a local college as commuters were roughly divided into thirds on their reason for this decision. About one-third really wanted to go away to college but couldn't afford it. Another third saw no reason to go away to college because local colleges had as much to offer as those farther away. The last third decided to stay at home for personal reasons having nothing to do with cost or other considerations.

Students tend to choose Grand Valley over other colleges because of good campus facilities, program considerations, academic diversity, academic reputation, and cost in that order. Non-CAS students are more likely to choose GVSC because of its academic diversity than non-CAS students. In choosing GVSC over other colleges, non-commuters were more attracted by campus facilities than commuters, who seemed to be attracted by lower cost and shorter driving distances. Early applicants are more likely to be attracted by GVSC's academic reputation than are later applicants.

Academic program considerations play a much larger role in the selection of a college within the GVSC federation than they do in the selection of our college or university over another. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the respondents indicated this as the reason for their choice of a college within GVSC, while only 17% indicated that program considerations were their reason for their choice of GVSC over other colleges.

As one might expect, non-CAS students are more likely to choose their college within GVSC because of its style or method of instruction than are CAS students. Likewise, commuting students are more concerned by a college's schedule of courses or instruction than are non-commuting students.

The influence of friends, high school personnel, and campus visits is greater when a student is choosing a college in general than it is when a choice is being made about a particular college within GVSC. The reverse is true in the case of the influence of the college catalog and brochures. Media advertising did not appear to have any great influence in either case. There were no significant differences between CAS and non-CAS students on outside influence on their choice of either GVSC or a college within GVSC. Although there were also no significant differences between commuters and non-commuters on the choice of a college within GVSC, in the choice of a college itself commuters are more influenced by parents and/or relatives, while non-commuters are more influenced by a campus visit. In addition, early applicants are more likely to choose GVSC because of the influence of parents and/or relatives than are later applicants.

Two thirds of the respondents agreed with the statement "If the particular college to which I was admitted was not in existence, I probably would not attend GVSC at all." Early applicants are more likely to agree than their later counterparts, while no significant difference exists between commuters and non-commuters on this issue. While not significant at the 95% confidence level, CAS students tended to agree and non-CAS students tended to disagree. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that CAS is the only traditional undergraduate college. If CAS did not exist, students seeking a traditional experience would not have any other alternative. On the other hand, students seeking a non-traditional collegiate experience would have other options at GVSC if the particular college to which they were admitted did not exist.

Conclusion

This project sampled first-time in any college freshmen admitted to one of the four GVSC undergraduate colleges in an effort to determine factors which affected college choice.

We also tested for statistically significant differences in three sub-sets of the data: between CAS and non-CAS students, commuters versus non-commuters, and early applicants versus later applicants. In all three sub-sets, significant differences were found. However, an examination of the data leads this author to hypothesize that, because CAS students were disproportionately represented among early applicants, we probably have a resulting contamination factor in the early applicant versus late applicant comparisons.

However, it does appear that various factors involved in college choice, and influences upon those choices, do have differing effects for commuters/non-commuters and CAS/non-CAS students which could bear upon recruiting and admissions efforts.

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